

**CHAPTER 6:
HBSE**

Summer Graduation



Students celebrate graduation in the crystal-clear San Marcos River, which runs through campus

Piecing Together the Whole Picture: Human Behavior and the Social Environment

“The environment
is everything that
isn’t me.”
--Albert Einstein

How We Build Knowledge of Reciprocal Interactions

Social work is distinguished as a profession by the fact that it looks for a whole picture: it studies behavior as it is shaped by people’s interaction with the social environment, and examines how the environment is molded by human behavior. This approach gives social workers a holistic, dynamic understanding of individuals and society which, in turn, serves as the knowledge base on which professionals build their practice skills and make practice decisions. Viewing the interaction between environment and behavior using the lens of systems theory is an approach that cuts across the School’s entire curriculum, providing a theoretical grounding for empirically-based social work practice with diverse systems of all sizes at all stages of life.



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.7—Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment. Social workers are knowledgeable about human behavior across the life course; the range of social systems in which people live; and the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being. Social workers apply theories and knowledge from the liberal arts to understand biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development. Social workers use conceptual frameworks to guide the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation; and critique and apply knowledge to understand person and environment.

Overview of HBSE Courses

The BSW sequence of HBSE consists of two courses: SOWK 3305 and SOWK 4305. These courses provide students with a theoretical base for generalist social work practice, employing a systems/ecological framework. The HBSE

sequence is organized around a multi-dimensional, systems-oriented approach. SOWK 3305, the first course in the sequence is focused on macro-level content. SOWK 4305, focused on mezzo- and micro-level content, is taught within this larger previously established macro perspective. As such, it is not only a cumulative course, but also an integrative one.

“Life can only be
understood
backwards; but it
must be lived
forwards.”
--Kierkegaard

We emphasize different theories within each systems level, so student can learn to engage in theory-based practice. Both courses build on the liberal arts base found in supportive social sciences. HBSE students study their own familial, cultural, and group affiliations, increasing their self-awareness, and they evolve in their own personal values about social work and about diversity. The HBSE courses support two student competencies: 2.1.4 Engage diversity and differences in practice, and 2.1.9 Respond to contexts that shape practice.

Core assignments in each course help students achieve these competencies. In 3305, students complete a research paper that explores a macro-level social system relevant to social work practice. The paper must address systems/ecological theory, developmental concepts, and values/oppression content, using scholarly sources. 4305 students write a formal autobiography paper and then apply theoretical content, particularly the life course perspective, toward understanding their own lives. They discuss their papers in small groups to learn about each other and to ponder alternate or additional ways to apply the theory.

- ❖ **SOWK 3305 Human Behavior and Social Environment I** focuses on the reciprocal interaction of behavior and environment in large groups, organizations, communities, and society, using systems and developmental frameworks, while addressing how diversity and social justice affect behavior and environment.
- ❖ **SOWK 4305 Human Behavior and Social Environment II** integrates knowledge from the social sciences, eco-systems, and developmental frameworks to focus on the reciprocal interaction of behavior and environment at the micro and mezzo levels including individuals, families, and small groups. It focuses on the bio-psycho-social-spiritual developmental perspective and covers the entire life cycle.

Social Systems and How They Affect Development

HBSE as a curricula area is organized around a broader social systems theory. While any given situation could be viewed primarily through the micro, mezzo, or macro lens, social systems theory emphasizes all three levels and how they interact and produce reciprocal influences. While it is important to identify the individual's biological, psychological, social, and spiritual attributes, it is equally critical to evaluate the environment's physical, social, and ideological components. Students consider the multiple influences of these interactive factors in understanding human problems and potentials.

At the interface of these two domains lies culture, a personal and environmental element deeply embedded through the HBSE curriculum. We study diversity from a systems perspective in which the client system's individual, familial, cultural, and societal aspects interact and influence development. In turn, these

interact with the social worker's personal and professional values and ethics. Diversity is also closely linked to inequity and social justice, which increasingly includes an international perspective.

Students study the variable, fluid, multi-dimensional systems which must be examined separately to understand how they contribute to human functioning, and then must be synthesized in a theoretical whole to explain problems from a conceptual basis. Throughout its history, social work as a profession has tended to vacillate between placing an emphasis on personal or social explanations. Contemporary best practice requires an integrative approach in which these various factors, and how they interact, are necessary for a full understanding of human behavior and development. That is, while these factors can be studied separately, they cannot be understood without considering their interactive influences.

Students investigate factors that set up risky reciprocal interactions between the individual and environment, such as poverty, culture, religion, and gender identity. They study how sociopolitical processes affect uneven distribution of power and resources in society. They look at how systems, such as schools or the workplace or political structures, affect how the individual, group, or society develops, and whether that development leads them to healthy or unhealthy ways of living. Our HBSE courses stress that all persons possess untapped reserves of mental, physical, and emotional resources that can help them grow and develop. Any factor can be seen as a source of resilience or vulnerability, or as a source of risk or support. Here are some examples of how we teach this complex material:

- ❖ **SOWK 3305 HBSE I** students list all the agencies and people that are important in their own lives, and then create an ecomap for themselves. They also do a strength exercise, in which each student writes his/her strengths on a piece of paper, folding it over so that the writing cannot be seen. Students divide into dyads, and another student then identifies the perceived strengths of his/her partner in the dyad. Finally each student ends up with an affirming list of personal strengths.
- ❖ In **SOWK 4305 HBSE II**, students give group presentations on an area of institutional discrimination, examining such issues as ethnocentrism, sexism, or racism, and discussing how the issue is shaped by reciprocity. Students present information that is not included in their assigned readings, and they must link that information specifically to practice.

The Theoretical Base of HBSE

HBSE is organized broadly around social systems theory and specifically on particular theories that are most applicable at the micro, mezzo, or macro levels. HBSE content is focused on applying these theoretical models toward assessment, defined as determining the most relevant causal factors contributing to a problem as well as potential solutions. HBSE emphasizes theoretical knowledge, including an analysis of theory building, benefits and limits of theories, and the need for theory-based practice.

“In educating undergraduates, I have the joy of not only linking students to our profession, but also sharing the triumphs of our profession in hopes of helping students find the passion I have for this work.”
--Stacie McGee,
Lecturer

Both HBSE courses (3305 and 4305) assist students to develop viable explanations for human behavior within the social environment that can then guide practice intervention and evaluation, supported by social work values and ethics. Both HBSE course are organized around assessing resiliency (strengths or protective factors) weighed against vulnerability (weaknesses or risk factors). Students develop a theoretical perspective that acknowledges and builds strengths at all systems levels to foster high functioning.

While systems and ecological theories are not the same, they are highly compatible. In our HBSE courses, the ecological perspective is conceptualized in terms of holistic, continuous, reciprocal adaptation and the transactional "fit" between the people and their environments. Systems theory pertains to social systems (as opposed to general systems) and describes the dynamic, transactional interaction of systems and their members with the environment. Ecological systems theory (or eco-systems theory) blends both perspectives. The ecological systems perspective is the theoretical foundation for generalist (BSW) social work practice.

SOWK 3305 provides an introductory overview of HBSE. Faculty present systems and ecological theory and expand from this basic perspective with other theories such as conflict, acculturation, empowerment, feminism, rational choice, social exchange, social network, social constructionist, developmental, social behavioral, and humanistic ideas. Students study different dimensions of human development and functioning (biological, psychological, social, and spiritual) from different theoretical perspectives. The macro-level content focuses on the physical environment, culture, social structures and institutions (global and national), families, social groups, formal organizations, communities, and social movements.

SOWK 4305 builds upon this content and expands on the micro and mezzo levels specific to individuals, families, and groups. It begins with an overview of the life course, which students use to understand an individual, assess functionality, and recommend initial theory-based strategies for change. The course then explores life stages from conception and birth to late adulthood. Faculty cover relevant theories (i.e., cognitive, social, or moral development) in each stage, while discussing significant social factors, such as poverty, physiological risk, family support, etc.

Students also learn about the relevance of the natural environment in addition to the social environment to human adaptation. "Deep ecology" takes an ecological/systems point of view regarding the interdependence of humans on the global (and local) natural environmental system. "Sustainability" is a term that encompasses social, economic, and environmental justice for all people worldwide. Both of these perspectives include the need for a spiritual connection to the planet and each other as well as a respect for the wisdom of indigenous peoples. It is rooted in values and ethics, especially the interconnectedness of all life and the goal of eradicating inequity of resources.

In both courses, students investigate empirically-derived research and integrate it with theory. For example, in 3305, students write a formal research paper. In 4305, students briefly present the highlights of an empirical study that

A 2011 graduate wrote Dr. Wisner, saying: "Thank you for teaching mindful meditation in HBSE. I've practiced it ever since, and it has helped me overcome anxiety when I faced deadlines."

has relevance to a particular life stage, and then the class discusses how this study is relevant to practice.

Students in **SOWK 3305 HBSE I** are invited to participate in a brief meditation during a class highlighting spiritual and religious diversity. While the meditation offered is secular in nature, students discuss how meditation may be used in cultural practices, and how meditation can be used as a self-care method.

In **3305 HBSE I**, students view the film “For the Bible Tells Me So” which prompts them to think about how religious views and sexual orientation intersect. Students use critical thinking skills to integrate theoretical and practice content in discussing how social workers can address issues about GLBT concerns in families.

SOWK 3305 HBSE I students view Maya Angelou’s “Rainbow in the Clouds” as an example of services to individuals, families, and communities with vulnerable populations.

In **SOWK 4305 HBSE II**, social work practitioners from the community present guest lectures on systematic bias and barriers to service in such areas as mental health, chemical dependency, and child welfare.

Students in **SOWK 4305 HBSE II** create a timeline of their own lives, including experiences they see as positive or negative, and how their perceptions of these experiences have changed over time. They start with the contextual variables that existed before they were born, and they look to the future and project their legacy. Students revisit this timeline as they study developmental phases.

Looking at the Range of Social Systems

Students evaluate theories for their impact on vulnerable populations and on social justice. Since our School mission is to prepare social workers to serve disadvantaged clients typically served by public monies, we encourage students to view people as having strengths, and we urge students to empower clients and client groups. For example, through case scenarios and classroom exercises, students study different cultures, but we encourage them to move this knowledge and sensitivity a step forward into cultural competence. Students learn to articulate how variables such as gender and sexual orientation are relevant and how they can be harnessed to advantage.

The relevance of various theories shift with different developmental stages, diverse groups, and systems level. Consequently, we present theories which are relevant to the course content. For example, attachment theory is quite relevant to an infant’s development and at the system level of the individual and caretaker. It also applies to study of diverse group differences and factors of environmental risk, as we study in **SOWK 4305 HBSE II** (which looks at individual and family development). Conversely, theories of organizational behavior or community development are most relevant to undergraduate **SOWK 3305 HBSE I** (which examines macro development).

It is easy for students to focus on individual development, since they draw parallels to their own personal life journey. We ensure that students are exposed to theories and knowledge that apply across all system levels. Half the HBSE sequence centers on individual and family development, and half on

Miranda is a public child welfare Family Safety Caseworker who held a Title IV-E stipend to expand her child welfare knowledge and skills. She said, “The BSW program has affected me by the intense casework. This learning is the most challenging work that I have ever done. The Title IV-E stipend program has helped me know that I can take on any task or job!”

larger group development. HBSE content is so central to assessing case material that students learn a great deal of HBSE material in practice courses and other parts of the curriculum. We do not see micro and macro levels of practice as mutually exclusive. For example, behavioral theory is relevant to making assessments of individual behavior and in guiding direct treatment planning. Behavior theory is also relevant to macro practice as we assess how behaviors shape organizational responses.

Maddison, an HBSE student, said, "I really enjoyed learning systems theory. It helps me understand the client's life stage while looking at all other parts of the client's life".

Understanding Social Systems

Students draw on their liberal arts background to learn about systems, applying larger systems knowledge to their policy courses and their macro practice courses, and applying micro knowledge in their micro practice courses. Capturing HBSE content is not strictly a matter of knowledge-building--though knowledge is critical. HBSE is really about putting knowledge and theory to practical use, particularly in assessment. HBSE theories are explanatory and descriptive, while practice theories are geared to interventions and solutions. Throughout our HBSE courses, we teach students assessment skills: collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing data collected from the client/client group/client system and other relevant systems. This process determines why a particular system is having a specific problem at a given time.

We view assessment as both an explanation leading to a clear formulation, which makes assessment a product; and an analysis of what steps are most appropriate to ameliorate the problem, which is assessment leading to an intervention plan. Using this conceptualization of assessment helps our students to move between different system sizes while using a similar array of thinking skills. It also helps students to think through the different professional roles a social worker might assume in addressing issues in various systems. For instance, a social worker, based on assessment, may work to intervene at any systems level: counseling on a family or individual level; advocacy at a group or community level; program design and implementation at an organizational level; and/or policy development at a societal level.

Social systems, we teach students, are imprinted by the reciprocal, interactive nature of relationships and values. Students explore their own values and compare them to professional, societal, and cultural values. This self-exploration sets the stage for students to develop a life-long pattern of seeking self-awareness; and then evaluating and changing their attitudes and behavior based on self-awareness.

HBSE content also centers on context, and students learn a great deal about the importance of context to reciprocal relationships. They also learn to use research to build and critique theory, and to assess how social systems affect clients. Students learn not only to critically evaluate theory, but to question research as well. This open-minded, informed skepticism forms the basis for ongoing, continued professional development through the course of our graduates' careers. It also leads them to be discriminating in examining and assessing social systems, and how they affect people's lives.